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Communique

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SUBJECT Interview with Admiral Stansfield Turner

ADMIRAL STANSFIELD TURNER: Let's not kid ourselves. All of our diplomacy, all of our economic power and pressure, all of our military threat is here to influence other countries, to make sure they don't do things inimical to us. Covert political action is another tool in that quiver of arrows.

ANNOUNCER: Admiral Stansfield Turner, the tenth man to hold the post of Director of the Central Intelligence Agency since its creation in 1947. When he took the job three years ago, the CIA had suffered intense congressional and public criticism. Admiral Turner has directed the rehabilitation of the agency, but problems and critics persist.

On this edition of Communique, Admiral Turner is interviewed by NPR's Nina Totenberg and Peter Osnos of The Washington Post.

PETER OSNOS: Admiral, in going over your tenure at the Central Intelligence Agency, I was struck by the repeated references to an agency in turmoil and change, resignations, realignments.

What are the key differences between the CIA now and the way it was when you arrived?

ADMIRAL TURNER: The morale is really on the upgrade today, Peter. When I arrived, the agency was still in something of a state of shock from all the years of criticism -- the Church Committee, the Rockefeller Commission, the other quite proper investigations, but ones that led to excessive criticism, in my opinion, in the media of the United States, and, naturally, discouraged the members of the CIA, who were really very patriotic

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people, had been doing their best, and now found themselves subject to such intense public criticism.

OSNOS: Do you think that the CIA is as capable of doing the kinds of activities, covert activities, as well as its intelligence functions, analysis functions, as it was before, with all these new restraints: congressional oversight, watchdog committees?

ADMIRAL TURNER: We do two quite separate things. We collect and analyze intelligence. We also are the only agency of the government authorized to conduct covert action. They are quite separate.

Let me emphasize that in my opinion our ability to collect and analyze intelligence is not impaired significantly; and I am very impressed, in these 2 1/2 years, with the capabilities that we have.

The covert action area, which is defined as attempting to influence events in other countries without the source of influence being identified, is restrained somewhat by the laws and regulations that have been passed; specifically, the large number of people that we have to notify, especially in the congressional committees, seven of them, if we're going to undertake a covert action. If somebody releases that information, it's no longer covert.

NINA TOTENBERG: Admiral, there are stories running around Washington that the President and Zbigniew Brzezinski are leaning on you fairly hard to undertake more covert operations, and that you're resisting them at this moment. Is that true?

ADMIRAL TURNER: No, that is not true. We, as a policy, do not discuss covert actions, and whether we're undertaking them and whether they are not. But I have given you the best answer I can to a question that was peripheral to whether we're doing covert actions or not.

TOTENBERG: I want to ask you about some of the problems that the CIA has had in protecting its secrecy agreements. The federal government, at the urging of the CIA, went after Frank Snepp for the publication of his book,...

ADMIRAL TURNER: Yes.

TOTENBERG: ...and won, at least so far.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Yes. Hooray.

TOTENBERG: You testified at his trial that there was information the CIA didn't want to have out, and he hadn't sub-

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mitted his manuscript in advance. That was his cardinal sin.

Now, in recent months, a number of former agen...

ADMIRAL TURNER: It wasn't a sin, it was a breach of contract. Excuse me.

TOTENBERG: All right, a breach of contract.

But in recent months, a number of former CIA people have talked and written quite freely. Cord Meyer, the former Deputy Director of the Clandestine Services for the CIA writes a column; and I am told, on good authority, he does not submit it for review in advance. There's a new book out on former Director Helms called The Man Who Kept the Secrets. In the front of the book it says -- the author says, "I interviewed Mr. Helms," I interviewed so-and-so, I interviewed so-and so.

All these people seem to be quite free to speak their mind and to speak without reviewing in advance what they said. So, it seems to me that you have an agency that's far more out of control than -- than a little breach-of-contract suit would suggest, and that you can't stop people from publishing, on the one hand, and other people not, on the other hand.

ADMIRAL TURNER: We have a very specific secrecy agreement that people enter into when they come into employment with the Central Intelligence Agency. We've had this since 1948. In those cases where people specifically violate that agreement, which is related to publishing material that is derived from their experience in the Central Intelligence Agency...

TOTENBERG: Cord Meyer writes a column that derives from his experience at CIA. Does he submit it in advance?

ADMIRAL TURNER: It depends on whether or not the actual column has material in it that discloses what he did when he was at the CIA. Cord Meyer has a book in process which he has submitted to us for the normal clearance process.

Until the Snepp case is fully through the courts, we have an uncertain legal status; and we are waiting for that to determine how we handle all of the other possible cases. We have to wait till the Supreme Court has finished reviewing it before any other court or the Attorney General would consider other cases.

OSNOS: One of the frequent criticisms of the CIA's role in the past few years is that some of the estimates have been tailored for political purposes. There was the whole flap over Saudi oil estimates and whether the Saudis could produce greater or lesser amounts of oil. It was said that their oil

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productivity was understated, for political purposes, to suit the White House, which is trying to encourage conservation here; and that the Soviet needs were overstated, again, in an effort to get people to cut back on their energy usage.

Is that a fact? Can the CIA's...

ADMIRAL TURNER: No.

OSNOS: ...estimates be used for political purposes? How do you prevent that from happening in a climate as complicated and heated as ours?

ADMIRAL TURNER: It's absolutely not true. You prevent it by being people of integrity, which we are, to the best of our human capacity.

I would only refer you here, Peter, to the record. Go back and read the April 1977 oil study and its supplement in July of that year about Soviet oil. Both of those have come true. If they were politically motivated, they were doggone accurate while they were at it.

Where people get confused is it would be a shame if good intelligence did not shape our policy. And, therefore, in the long run, intelligence and policy frequently are coincident, if you see what I mean.

We're very proud of those oil studies, in this case, because they have generally been held up over these past 2 1/2 years.

OSNOS: My impression, sir, is that, at least in the case of the Saudis, that they have shown that they can produce more oil than the CIA had said in its initial estimates of a year or so ago.

ADMIRAL TURNER: No, that's absolutely untrue. In fact, 2 1/2 years ago people were talking about the Saudis going as high as 16 million barrels a day; and they're at 9 1/2 today and really stretching and helping us in the free world. They've gone up almost nothing in the last couple of years, other than this extra million that they've put on the line in order to help the world situation in the last six months.

OSNOS: So, what you're saying is, as a practical matter, the Saudis are incapable of producing substantially more oil than they are now.

ADMIRAL TURNER: They're right at capacity, very close to capacity today. The big issue is, how much additional capacity do they invest in to enhance their capability for the 1980s?

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That's an issue for the future, and was a big subject of debate in our studies.

OSNOS: Admiral, are you satisfied, now, that the SALT treaty is verifiable? I know that you had some question in the past.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, let me say that you are not reflecting my attitude, you're reflecting misinterpretations by the American media.

The role of intelligence in verification of SALT is to tell the President, on the one hand, and the Congress, the Senate, on the other, how well we can check on what the Soviets are doing under each term of the treaty. It is not to determine whether the treaty is verifiable, because that involves a lot of political decisions as to whether the treaty is good for us and what you think the Soviets are going to do and how quickly we can respond if they violate the treaty, and so on.

If I get into that kind of a judgment, then the senators, for instance, will feel maybe I'm advocating the treaty, and be less likely to trust our evaluations of how well we can check on it.

So I've restrained myself to what is called monitoring. I tell the Senate and the President how well I can monitor each element of the treaty. It's up to those policymakers then to decide if that is adequate for verification.

OSNOS: Are you satisfied, then, that you can monitor the treaty to the point that its verification can be assured?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I have clearly stated, on the public record, that we can adequately monitor most of the provisions of the treaty. On those provisions where we have less confidence in our monitoring, I do not believe there is a high likelihood of the Soviets' attempting to cheat.

TOTENBERG: Admiral, under the ground rules of this interview, which are completely understandable, we've agreed not to ask you anything about the current situation in Iran.

ADMIRAL TURNER: So here it comes.

TOTENBERG: So -- no. But I am wondering if, in view of the experience that we've undergone in the last few weeks in Iran, if you're making any reassessment of the numbers of people with diplomatic cover, CIA people with diplomatic cover that you will in the future assign to embassies in troubled areas.

ADMIRAL TURNER: I am not at liberty to comment on as

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detailed a question about the techniques of conducting intelligence as that, Nina.

One of the things I have done in the past 2 1/2 years is try to make our intelligence activities much more open to the American public. As a result of all these investigations and people questioning, it has seemed to me important that the American people regain a sense of confidence in their intelligence institutions.

But we draw the line very scrupulously on what we call sources and methods of intelligence. Just as you protect, as a newspaper or a journalist or a media person, your sources of information, we must protect ours, or we will not have them tomorrow. Methods: the techniques, the highly sensitive equipments that we use to collect intelligence.

TOTENBERG: You said in a speech that you gave at the American Bar Association meeting this summer that there really is no way to tell -- and I think -- I'm paraphrasing here, but I'm almost quoting -- that a 78-year-old quasi-senile fanatic would end up unifying a country into a huge revolution.

And I guess my question to you is, why is that impossible to know? I mean we pride ourselves on an intelligence community that is able to tell the psychology of a country. And why were we not able to foresee the psychology of this country?

ADMIRAL TURNER: What we saw was -- in Iran, a year and a few months ago, was a lot of discontent, a lot of different kinds of groups who were unhappy with the way the country was being run, some for religious reasons, some for political reasons, some for economic reasons. And what I did say, without quite so many pejorative adjectives as you used, was that while we saw these various centers of discontent, we did not find cause to believe they would all coalesce together into a movement led by a 78-year-old cleric who'd been an expatriate for 16 years from his own country.

I don't know any academics or any journalists who made that same prediction, although all of us were aware of the discontent. We all assumed that with the amount of military and police power that the Shah had, that he would be able to tamp down this discontent before it got out of control. And I don't know why he didn't. I don't know exactly what happened. But I believe that there was this coalescence behind Khomeini that led to it being a stronger movement than the Shah felt he could handle with his military force.

And, finally, I would say that it's just the most difficult part of intelligence to predict true revolutions, which is what this was. It wasn't a revolution with plotting, with

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places you could go and steal a document or listen to a conversation and see where the movement was going. This was, in our day, in my lifetime, probably the only true revolution that we have seen.

TOTENBERG: But shouldn't we be able to foresee those? I mean I would think those are the things we really should be able to foresee.

ADMIRAL TURNER: We always like to see everything that's coming. I'm just saying to you this is the most difficult type of thing to see. And we weren't alone. There weren't many people who were forecasting the course of events in that country.

OSNOS: Let me raise one that's been obscured a bit by the events in Iran. It's only been about three weeks or so since our principal military ally in Asia, Park Chung Hee, the President of Korea, was assassinated by his own KCIA chief. Was that something that you could have foreseen coming? How great a threat do you believe that is to the United States, to the integrity of our intelligence-gathering apparatus? I gather we were very close with those folks at the KCIA. Certainly that's been the general presumption over the years.

What about that incident up there? How significant was it?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I believe that it was an impulsive action that took place on rather short notice. Surely, had we any indication of what, we would have notified the President, and hopefully it would not have taken place.

So, that -- assassinations, coups, true revolutions, elections that go in the wrong -- or, the unexpected direction, these are indeed the most difficult part of the intelligence end.

I don't want to make excuses. It would have been nice if we could have figured that one out. I think, in this case, all the evidence that I've seen shows it was a very last-minute concept that was developed by a rather small number of people. But that's in the courts in Korea, and I probably even shouldn't be commenting on it at this point.

OSNOS: Admiral, give us a list of the three biggest intelligence successes of the past year. We could list you all the failures. We've talked about Iran. You've just mentioned Korea. What are the three biggest successes? What did you foresee coming? What did the 12 intelligence agencies that this government have provide in the last year that really should be pleased about?

ADMIRAL TURNER: We're very proud of the way in which

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we forecast the Chinese-Vietnamese conflict and the dimensions that it would take over the months leading up to the attack last February.

We're very proud of the consistently fine work we do in this energy field. We've just released a new energy study which updates the one we talked about a little earlier, Peter. It generally confirms the conclusions of that. You know, the numbers change, certain other things change, but the basic thrust. We feel we have helped enlighten the debate in this country because of the forward-looking studies we've done in the energy field.

And, thirdly, we're very proud of how we've uncovered the Cuban -- or, the Soviet brigade in Cuba, which was a very difficult thing to do. And, again, I can't talk to you about the methods we used to do it. But it was a very astute piece of intelligence activity.

OSNOS: If I may just follow up on those Cuban -- Soviet troops in Cuba.

ADMIRAL TURNER: I thought you might.

OSNOS: I'm, I would say, surprised to hear you describe that as an intelligence success. I think there's a good deal of discussion about exactly what that brigade was up to. And there are many people, now, on Capitol Hill who believe the whole issue was wildly overblown, that these troops probably had been there, in one form or another, for perhaps as long as 17 years; that certainly there hadn't been any major changes in the last couple of years that represented a threat to the United States in any way; and that probably the issue should have been handled in a very different fashion from the way it was. In fact, the intelligence was exaggerated, if my impression is correct.

ADMIRAL TURNER: I don't know of anybody who's -- well, I don't think I know of anybody who's said the intelligence was exaggerated. And all the factors you are talking about are not intelligence: how the thing was handled and whether it's a threat to the United States. Those are not basically my concerns. Those are evaluations for the policymakers.

What I'm saying is that you have a very tight country, where it's hard to make contact. You have here not a question of is there a brigade there; is this brigade a Soviet brigade that is planning and doing its own training, rather than advising the Cubans? Its equipment is identical to what the Cubans have. So, when you watch them on a training activity, you have difficulty in knowing who's who, because it's all the same.

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Finding out that this particular unit had shifted its method of operation into what we call a combat brigade was very well done by our intelligence experts.

TOTENBERG: Admiral, let me switch the subject a little and take you into the sort of darker world of intelligence. And I'd like to ask you two related questions.

This British scandal of Sir Anthony Blunt, the counter-intelligence spy who turned out to be a mole for the Soviets. I wonder if you -- do you think that if that had happened in this country, that it would have also been kept a secret for 15 years? Do you think that the story, his -- the fact that he had been a spy, a secret spy for the Soviets, do you think that should have been kept a secret?

ADMIRAL TURNER: You're touching on the sorest point, the most difficult point of American intelligence in 1979, Nina; and that's, whether we wanted -- would have wanted to have kept such a thing a secret or not, I don't think we could in this country today.

The biggest problem I have in conducting our intelligence activities is in keeping secret what needs to be kept secret.

Do you know that somebody who works for the Department of Agriculture and who talks publicly about the grain futures can go to jail; whereas you can talk about intelligence sources and methods, and you never have any way of prosecuting a person? Do you realize that today, this instant, a man named Philip Agee, a traitor to our country who has done nothing for the last five or six years but try to disclose and hamper the activities of the CIA, is suing the CIA under the Freedom of Information Act?

TOTENBERG: What I am asking you is whether, in a free society with a necessary secret intelligence service, when you find out that somebody has been a spy for the other side, has come out of retirement to help two spies from the other side escape to Moscow, whether that should be kept a secret within the service.

ADMIRAL TURNER: You're asking me to pass judgment on what the United Kingdom did some years ago, when neither one of us have the full facts.

What would you say, Nina, if -- and this is strictly hypothesis on my -- I mean it's not even a hypothesis, it's just conjecture. What if, by disclosing that Blunt had been a spy, it would have cost a secret intelligence officer's life? What if that had been the price for disclosing that umpteen years ago?

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TOTENBERG: I'm not even talking, necessarily, about public disclosure; but apparently the Prime Minister didn't know.

The reason I've bothered you with all this is that there's a raging debate in the intelligence community of this country between the Helms/Angleton forces and the old Colby forces over whether or not, quite frankly, there is a mole, or was a mole, high in the CIA. And suggestion has clearly been made that it might have been Mr. Colby. And Mr. Helms has suggested in interviews that the counterintelligence service of this country was destroyed when Mr. Colby was the CIA Director.

And I -- you are now the CIA Director. How did you find the counterintelligence service?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I find that counterintelligence is almost the most difficult part of the task, because you can become suspicious at almost anything. So it is a very, very delicate area.

I believe that I have made every effort to check whether we have a mole, whether we are penetrated in one way or another. And I don't believe that we are today.

At the same time, I never make that statement without saying, "I'm not sure." Because if I get complacent about our not having a mole, that's the kind of attitude that will lead to there being one.

TOTENBERG: Isn't it a fact that most of the major compromises in the last few years, the major compromises of intelligence have come from low-level clerks who were somehow penetrated by the Soviets, who bought information off of them.?

ADMIRAL TURNER: From the United States side, that is true. Most of the known cases of espionage have been medium-to-low-level people who have just had access to the information in a mechanical sort of way, generally.

OSNOS: The reason why the secrecy of the CIA has been attacked in recent years is because of the abuses of not only the secrecy of the CIA, but other agencies and branches of the government. The fact is that we've lived through a whole series of programs conducted by CIA, by FBI that were directed at American citizens. We find that many Americans were being tracked while they were overseas, who were innocent, and that there were vast records on them, or at least records on them, in the CIA files and FBI files. In fact, it was abuse that has caused redress.

How can you guaranty, if some new kinds of some new restraints were put on sort of the leaks out of the CIA and other

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intelligence organizations, that we won't go back into the same kind of abuse?

ADMIRAL TURNER: One, the reports that you cite are somewhat exaggerated, though there is truth in them, too.

Second, we have an entirely new set of oversight procedures today which give the American public increased assurance against any such repetition. The President has an Intelligence Oversight Board. If you, one of my employees, anyone feels there's something going on in the intelligence world, they may go directly -- not through me, if it's an employee, for instance -- to that board and ring the bell. And that board reports only to the President, and he reviews their findings and then decides what to do.

Secondly, we have a committee in each chamber of our Congress dedicated exclusively to intelligence, and they conduct oversight. They ask me many of the questions you've asked me, as these events have unfolded over the last several years. And we go up there and lay it out for them, chapter and verse, in great detail, until they're satisified. And they frequently publish unclassified reports of what they have found.

I believe that this system gives the American public a lot of assurance that there will be uncovering of any such activities if they took place. And I assure you that all of us in the organization are acutely aware of the importance of not letting any such things take place. And I have not, in my 2 1/2 years, had to stop any. That is, the organization is conscious of it and is not doing things that are against the regulations.

TOTENBERG: Do you still want a CIA charter?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I want a charter very much. I think a charter is important for our country. On the one hand, it will make clear to the American public what the intelligence agencies are all about.

Secondly, it's of great importance to us, because it lays down for us the rules within which we must operate.

TOTENBERG: I want to ask...

ADMIRAL TURNER: And that gives us a foundation upon which to do the job the country's asked us to do.

TOTENBERG: I want to ask you something about the charter proposals that the Administration has informally made. They include a proposal that the CIA should be able to tap Americans abroad, even Americans who are not suspected of espionage, because they might have information. Now, that would seem to be

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targeted at businessmen, lawyers, journalists abroad.

What's the justification for doing that? If they won't voluntarily cooperate, that you're going to tap them?

ADMIRAL TURNER: The procedure planned involves going to the courts of the United States to obtain permission to do that, just as the FBI must go to the courts if they're going to tap telephones in the United States itself. So this is carrying out the domestic rules that now exist into the intelligence overseas activities.

And let me assure you that, coupled with the oversight procedures I've just referred to and the strict rules under which this would be conducted, I believe the rights of the citizen are properly balanced with the equal right of the citizen to have its country know what it needs to know in order to conduct a very sound, astute foreign policy.

ANNOUNCER: CIA Director Stansfield Turner, speaking with Peters Osnos, national editor of The Washington Post, and NPR's Nina Totenberg.

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